Punch and England's Men of Letters

LONDON *Punch* in its early days was vehement in its literary likes and dislikes. It had its favorites and its pet antipathies. When there was a quarrel between literary men it was usually to be found emphatically on one side or the other. For example, in the controversy between Bulwer Lytton and Alfred Tennyson it offered its columns to the latter. Bulwer, in "The New Timon," had referred to Tennyson as "School Miss Alfred." Tennyson's retort was of unexpected vigor.

A Timon thou? Nay, nay, for shame;
It is too arrogant a jest.
That fierce old man to take his name,
You bandbox, off, and let him rest.

Then there was another line in which Tennyson summed up his opponent as "the padded man who wears the stays." Eventually there was a kind of reconciliation between the two men of letters. But that did not make *Punch* much more tolerant of Bulwer. On the other hand, the paper never faltered in its attitude as a champion of Tennyson.

In its dealings with Algernon Charles Swinburne *Punch* experienced a change of heart. Its attitude toward the early Swinburne was typically British Philistine. In the controversy that in 1866 raged over "Poems and Ballads" the paper protested in the name of respectability. It said that "having read Mr. Swinburne's defense of his prurient poetics Punch hereby gives him his royal license to change his name to what is evidently its true form—'Swineborn.'" The idea was not quite original with *Punch*, for in the warfare that had been waged in pamphlets between Swinburne and Dr. Halliwell Phillips the latter invariably called the poet "Pigsbrook." Thirty years later *Punch* was more amiably disposed toward Swinburne. In 1897 there was brought forward the idea of establishing a British Academy. *Punch* made free use of Swinburne's publicly avowed disgust at having his name associated with the scheme, to which he referred as a "ridiculous monster," and also made a jest of the matter by printing imaginary letters from various aspirants—Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Grant Allen, William Watson, "Sarah Grand" and Clement Scott.

By the time of Swinburne's death in 1909 *Punch* was in a mood to pay him full tribute. It forgot Swinburne's violence in controversy, his extravagance and lawlessness of spirit. It forgot the rebel and remembered only the singer, and wrote:

What of the night? For now his day is done,
And he, the herald of the red sunrise,
Leaves us in shadow even as when the sun
Sinks from the somber skies.

High peer of Shelley, with the chosen few
He shared the secrets of Apollo's lyre,
Nor less from Dionysian altars drew
The god's authentic fire.

Last of our land's great singers, dowered at birth
With music's passion, swift and sweet and strong,
Who taught in heavenly numbers new to earth
The wizardry of song.

His spirit, fashioned after Freedom's mold,
Impatient of the bonds that mortals bear,
Achieves a franchise large and uncontrolled,
Rapt through the void of air.

What of the night? For him no night can be;
The night is ours, left songless and forlorn;
Yet o'er the darkness, where he wanders free,
Behold, a star is born.

Naturally *Punch* was amiable in its treatment of Thackeray, for the reason that he was early and long a member of the *Punch* family. It was for *Punch* that he wrote the papers that make up the "Book of Snobs," the "Letters to a Young Man About Town," his "Punch's Prize Novelists" and the "Yellowplush Papers," in which he satirized savagely "Sawedwadbulwiglytton," as he called the eminent if somewhat eccentric and rhetorical author of "The Caxtons." Not only did Thackeray write for *Punch;* his suggestion is perceptible in many of the cartoons in the forties and early fifties. Although he retired from the *Punch* staff in 1854 as a protest against the paper's continued hostility to the French Emperor, which he thought unpatriotic at a time when England and France were in alliance, he remained a constant member of the council, and sat with them only eight days before his death, on Christmas eve, 1863. The tribute in the issue of January 2, 1864, paid tribute more to the comrade and fellow worker than to the man eminent in English letters. Seven years later, on the occasion of the announced betrothal of the Princess Louise to the Marquis of Lorne, *Punch* revealed Thackeray as the writer in the issue of February 3, 1849, of the suggestion that it would be wiser to seek matrimonial alliances for the royal family at home than to continue to import obscure and frequently pauperized German princes and princesses.

II.

In its attitude toward Americans *Punch* has, of course, not been consistently friendly, though no real American likes it the less for that. But it was exceedingly cordial in its welcome to the American humorists Artemus Ward and Mark Twain when they went to England in the sixties and seventies. Artemus Ward was in broken health when he lectured in London in 1866. *Punch* began its indorsement of the lectures with the words: "Mr. *Punch* would recommend 'funny men' on or off the stage to hear Artemus Ward 'speak his piece' at the Egyptian Hall, and then, in so far as in them lies, to go and do likewise." In addition the paper invited Artemus to contribute to its columns, the sincerest possible form of tribute, and the invitation led to the series of paper "Artemus Ward in London," which was published in 1866.

Seven years later Mark Twain arrived and *Punch* greeted him in the quatrain "Welcome to a Lecturer":

"'Tis time we Twain did show ourselves," 'twas said
By Cæsar, when one Mark had lost his head:
By Mark whose head's quite bright, 'tis said again:
"Therefore, go with me, friends, to bless this Twain."

From the American point of view that quatrain is so abominable that it is impossible to doubt its sincerity. Its spirit was maintained throughout Mark Twain's life. The humorist was entertained at the *Punch* table on the occasion of his last visit to England in 1907, when he went over to receive the degree of doctor of literature from Oxford.

III.

The author of "Mr. Punch's History of England," Mr. Charles L. Graves, considers that the literary issue of the paper was probably at its lowest ebb in 1893, when a review of Robert Louis Stevenson's "Catriona" was bracketed with a review of Marie Corelli's "Barabbas," recommending the latter and speaking of the former as a book for those who like Scots dialect, which *Punch* did not. Four years earlier, in January, 1889, it had included among its "Mems for the New Year" for literary men: "Resolutely to avoid making the most distant reference to 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.'" In that same year Punch printed a review of Mr. J. L. Steverson's "The Master of Ballantine," although there was no such author and no such book. But when, in 1894, Stevenson died in his early prime, *Punch* wrote:

The lighthouse builder raised no light
That shall outshine the flame
Of genius in its mellowest might,
That beacons him to fame.
And Pala's peak shall do yet more
Than the great light of Skerryvore
To magnify his name,
Who mourned, when stricken flesh would tire,
That he was weaker than his sire.

Teller of Tales! Of tales so told
That all the world must list:
Story sheer witchery, style pure gold,
Yet with that tricksey twist
Of Pucklike mockery which betrays
The wanderer in this world's mad maze,
Not blindly optimist,
Who woos Romance, yet sadly knows
That Life's sole growth is not the Rose.

Punch has also varied in its treatment of Rudyard Kipling. In 1890 it recognized in "Plain Tales from the Hills" a "new and piquant flavor," as of an Anglo-Indian Bret Harte. *Punch* found an "excessive abundance of phrases and local allusions which will be dark sayings to the uninitiated." But with that adverse criticism ended. For the rest *Punch* acknowledged in the new writer a surprising knowledge of life, military and native, and a happy command of pathos and humor. The tribute was followed up a few weeks later by the following limerick, which is more creditable to Mr. Punch's heart than his head.

"TO THE NEW SCRIBE AND POET."

O Rudyard, in this sherry,
I drink your very, very
Good health. I would
That write I could
Like Kipling sad or merry.

In 1894 the "Jungle Book" was welcomed by *Punch* with a salvo of puns on the Kip-lingo of the Laureate of the Jingle-Jungle, the Bard of the Bandarlog. In 1895 *Punch* characterized "The Men That Fought at Minden" as "perhaps the most coarse and unattractive specimen of verse that this great young man has yet put forth—a jumble of words without a trace of swing or music. All this Tommy Atkins business is about played out." In 1898 *Punch* attacked Kipling's "Imperialism," and in 1899 his "glorification of machinery"—calling him the "Polytechnic Poet." Finally, the *Punch* irritation reached its height with the publication of "Stalky and Company," which *Punch* considered an ignoble travesty of public school traditions, and the famous poem about the "flanneled fool at the wicket, and the muddied oaf at the goal." But the resentment had entirely passed in 1907, when *Punch* depicted Mr. Kipling as "A Very Parfit Nobel Knight"—on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize. In 1910 *Punch* happily compared the perusal of Kipling's "Rewards and Fairies" to reading English history by the light of a Will-o'-the-Wisp.

IV.

George Meredith was an old friend of Mr. *Punch* from the days when

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THE "SEXO-MANIA."

"We think *Lips That Have Gone Astray* the foulest novel that ever yet defiled the English tongue; and that in absolute filth its Author can give any modern French writer six and beat him hollow!"—*The Parthenon.*

FAIR AUTHOR (to her Publisher, pointing to above opinion of the Press quoted in his advertisement of her novel): "And pray, Mr. Shardson, what do you mean by inserting *this* hideous notice?"

PUBLISHER: "My dear Miss Fitzmorse, you must remember that we've paid you a large price for your book, and brought it out at great expense and we naturally wish to sell it!"

SHACON AND BAKESPEARE.

HOMER: "Look here, what *does* it matter which of you chaps wrote the other fellow's books? Goodness only knows *how* many wrote mine.

"The *Trilby* mania grows apace. It has reached Peckham. Aunt Maria went to the Fancy Dress Ball of the Peckham season as *Trilby* in her first costume." Extract from letter of Miss M. Br-wn to Miss N. Sm-th.

IBSEN IN BRIXTON.

MRS. HARRIS: "Yes, William, I've thought a deal about it, and I find I'm nothing but your Doll and Dickey Bird, and so I'm going!"

VICISSITUDES OF A RISING PERIODICAL.

THE PROPRIETOR: "I'll tell you what it is, Shardson, I'm getting sick of the 'ole bloomin' Show! *The Knacker* ain't selling a Scrap—No notice too of us anywhere—not a bloomin' Advertisement! And yet there ain't 'ardly a livin' Englishman of mark, from Tennyson downward, as we 'aven't shown up and pitched into, and dragged 'is Name in the Mud!"

THE EDITOR: "Don't let's throw up the Sponge yet, old Man! Let's give the dead 'uns a turn—let's have a shy at Thackeray, Browning, George Eliot, or, better still, let's bespatter General Gordon and Cardinal Newman a bit—*that* ought to fetch 'em a few, and bring us into Notice!"